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McMurtry, R. Gerald

A new portrait of Lincoln's  
childhood environment.









A NEW PORTRAIT  
OF  
LINCOLN'S  
CHILDHOOD  
ENVIRONMENT

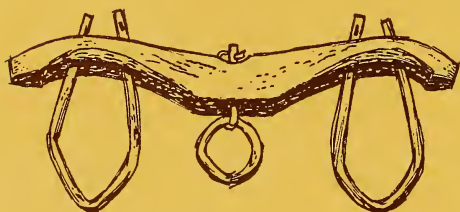
*By*

R. GERALD MCMURTRY



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A NEW PORTRAIT  
OF LINCOLN'S  
CHILDHOOD  
ENVIRONMENT



*By*  
R. GERALD MCMURTRY

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II

A NEW PORTRAIT OF LINCOLN'S  
CHILDHOOD ENVIRONMENT

*R. Gerald McMurtry*

**I**N MY work as librarian of the Lincoln National Life Foundation, I have found many uncomplimentary and incorrect statements regarding the early environment of Abraham Lincoln. After doing considerable research through early court documents and other reliable sources, I have come to the conclusion that a new portrait should be drawn—a new story told of the childhood environment of Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln biographers are responsible for much of this incorrect and unauthenticated information. Too little research was done by them, and they accepted too much of what had previously been said without investigating the facts themselves.

The usual procedure in the introductory chapters of the works of many uninformed authors was to attack the ancestry, legitimacy of birth, and father of the President. With such an introduction they next discussed his childhood environment. Such discussions were usually summed up in an uncomplimentary sentence or comment such as the following: "He was born in a squalid camp in a howling wilderness," or "In the midst of the most unpromising circumstances that ever witnessed the advent of a hero into the world, Abraham was born on the twelfth day of February 1809," or, as another author

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states, "He was born in an obscure community of canebrake society, in a hunter's hut not fit to be called a home."

These major charges which were thrown at the Lincoln family appear to have been an attempt of the biographers to lower their readers' estimation of the ancestry, birth, father, and environment of the President in order to contrast the greatness of his achievements. Today such contrasts are not necessary and I shall attempt to prove facts to the contrary.

### *Geographical Location and Physical Characteristics of the Community*

After the introductory chapters of the early uninformed biographers were completed, their next attacks were hurled against the geographical location and physical characteristics of the community of Lincoln's birth.

In reality, the location was an ideal spot for a pioneer to make his home. The Lincoln cabins were all located on important roads leading north and south between Louisville and Nashville, which enabled them to keep in touch with the outside world. The Indians were all gone, the country was rapidly being settled, and local governments were firmly established.

The soil of the county was of fair quality. The quantity and quality of timber were exceptional. The water supply of running brooks and never-failing springs were numerous. The climate was moderate. Because of the rolling nature of the terrain, many beautiful building sites were available well above flood levels. Windbreaks created by natural formations were also ideally located near building sites.

The Lincolns always lived close to small streams. In Elizabethtown their home was near Severn's Valley Creek, the birthplace farm was located near the South Fork of Nolin River, and Lincoln's second cabin home was near Knob Creek.

A recent United States geological survey has revealed that Nolin River, which runs near the birthplace farm, has more bends and turns in its course than any other stream in the United States. To get from one point to another just six miles away, it winds a distance of twenty miles. Such a sinuous course naturally makes it one of the most beautiful streams in Kentucky. It can be truthfully said that Lincoln was born near the most crooked river in the United States.

The second cabin home of Abraham Lincoln was situated in a small valley about eight miles north of the birthplace farm. On all sides of this site there is to be seen a tremendous stone escarpment called Muldraugh's Hill. The valley or bottom on which the farm was located received the silt which was carried from the surface of the hills by the winter and spring rains, making the land extremely rich and productive. A more ideal spot could not have been found, as the streams were filled with fish and the wooded knob area contained an abundance of game.

This peculiar knob section of Kentucky presents a very beautiful sight. In many instances the knobs rise abruptly to a height of five hundred feet, giving an appearance of giant mole-hills. The community of Lincoln's Kentucky years, with the exception of the Ohio River, was not so much unlike the environs of Louisville in physical features. John James Audubon, the great ornithologist, speaking in general terms of the Kentucky country around Louisville, which would likely embrace Hardin County, says, "The prospect from the town [Louisville] is such that it would please even the eye of a Swiss."

The reason for the adverse criticism of the Lincoln country in Kentucky is that the biographers failed to see conditions from the point of view of a pioneer. They compared a pioneer

cabin with a modern home, making no mention of the fact that some of the presidents preceding Lincoln were likewise born in log cabins. They cited incidents of hardship to which people in their day were not subject, and they did not consider the work of a pioneer contrasted with that of a latter-day farmer. Thus they failed to state the facts accurately and completely.

The physical features of central Kentucky, especially that part in which Lincoln was born, today present a very pleasing appearance. The roads are both beautiful and interesting, and it is not unlikely that many visitors to the sites of Lincoln's Kentucky homes are surprised at the natural beauty of the surrounding country. Such beauty must have been an inspiration to the youthful Lincoln.

### *The Financial Standing of Lincoln's Father*

In a discussion of the childhood environment of Abraham Lincoln, the financial standing of Thomas Lincoln becomes of paramount importance. In order to get an accurate view of the father's financial status it will be necessary to go back into colonial history to the paternal great-grandfather of the president. This colonial was named John Lincoln and he was one of Virginia's wealthiest men. In addition to his wealth, he exerted some political influence through his election to the Virginia legislature. Upon his death his estate was inherited by Captain Abraham Lincoln, who likewise became a Virginia planter. However, the pioneer spirit surged within Captain Lincoln and after hearing Daniel Boone describe the "Kentucky COUNTRY" he resolved to move to this veritable paradise.

Upon moving to Kentucky he disposed of his Virginia property and invested quite a large sum of money in Kentucky land. After residing in Kentucky four years he was massacred

by an Indian. At this time Thomas Lincoln was ten years old, and there was very little of the estate to be awarded to him—first, because the law of primogeniture was operative in Kentucky, and Thomas was the youngest son; and secondly, because the estate could not be liquidated. One reason for the difficulty of selling this land lay in the faulty land titles for which Kentucky was notorious. After the death of the father, the widow with her five children moved to Washington County.

When Thomas was old enough to work, he left his family. His first job of any importance was the building of a mill dam near Elizabethtown, Kentucky. He received for this work approximately one hundred and fifty dollars. Early tax lists show that he owned two house lots within the surveyed plot upon which Elizabethtown was then situated. In addition he owned a horse—at no time in the life of Thomas Lincoln after he reached the age of twenty-one was he without the possession of a horse. Early accounts show that he had excellent credit and some of these credits amount to approximately two hundred dollars. No accounts have been discovered that have not been paid and completely squared by Thomas Lincoln.

Two months before the marriage of Abraham Lincoln's parents, Thomas spent around two hundred dollars for a wedding outfit. With these clothes he probably used the suspenders and hat which he had purchased for ten dollars and ninety-four cents the year before. His homes, including the one in which Abraham was born, were of the same size as ninety per cent of the other pioneer cabins of that day. Three months before the birth of his son Abraham, Thomas Lincoln paid two hundred dollars cash for a 300-acre farm. The week of Abraham's birth he received seventeen dollars and sixty cents for services performed for Hardin County. A month after the

birth of Abraham he purchased another horse. By compiling Hardin County court records it has been discovered that in the year 1814 Thomas Lincoln ranked fifteenth in the entire county in property values.

Such historical data taken from authentic court records should silence for all time the charges that Abraham Lincoln grew up in poverty.

### *Home Training*

Abraham Lincoln was the eldest son and with the exception of a few months the only son, and no doubt he received from his parents a great amount of training. The Lincoln family's religious inclinations are well known, and it is likely that Lincoln acquired the habit of going to church from his parents.

Thomas Lincoln owned a large and expensive Bible, and hearing his mother read probably awakened in Abraham the interest he took in the Bible all of his life. His own reading in the Bible later undoubtedly influenced his thought, conduct, and style and composition.

Lincoln's father is known to have been inherently honest, and this characteristic likely strengthened the same tendencies in Abraham. His mother likewise influenced him in this respect, and eventually he became known as "Honest Abe." The mother no doubt instilled into young Lincoln lessons of kindness for which he later became noted.

His mother must have exerted a very great influence over him, as she was both intellectual and ambitious. We are quite sure that she stimulated his ambition for learning, with the result that during his residence in Kentucky he had read and studied several books.

Many of Lincoln's thoughts and characteristics which he is

today known to have possessed can be traced directly to the early training of his parents.

### *Cultural Environment*

The surroundings of Lincoln's Kentucky homes afforded many cultural aspects amid their pioneer setting, despite the fact that one biographer describes the Kentucky environment of the Lincolns as coarse, low, ignorant, and poverty stricken. Hardin County was composed in this early day of settlers from Virginia, Pennsylvania, the Carolinas, and other neighboring states, as well as from foreign counties. All the cultural qualities that had been acquired in their native states, these pioneers brought with them. After the settlement started its permanent growth, many tradesmen and professional men along with others came to reside there. This resulted in a balanced pioneer society in a well regulated community.

Social conditions in Elizabethtown and Hardin County were cordial and democratic. However, divisions in society naturally formed. The pioneer dress prevailed in this frontier community, but there were to be seen residents attired in the old world colonial dress of short breeches, white stockings, silver buckles at knee and ankle, and long ribbed dimity coats. An early historian describing the community states that one resident of pride and fashion rode in careful attire, traveling with a servant who kept at a respectable distance behind, with a large portmanteau on the crupper, a glazed hat in his hand, and a brace of horse pistols at the pommel. Such was the style of the lordly gentleman of that day in this community in which Lincoln's parents made their first home. Other residents wore their hair powdered and tied behind.

As early as 1800 a dancing master lived within the town's limits. Documentary evidence found in old court records show

that there were dances or balls held in the court house in the years 1807 and 1808. The churches of this period were very active in punishing their members who danced. An early record has been discovered, dated in the year 1794, in which a member was brought before the church for allowing "frolicking in his home."

Patriotic celebrations were also held in Elizabethtown while Lincoln's parents were residing there. In the year 1807 a number of prominent citizens of the town petitioned the court for the use of the court house for a celebration of the anniversary of American independence. A barbecue dinner was served, and there were many toasts and speeches made concerning the heroes of the American Revolution.

Horse racing, the sport of kings, was a favorite recreation of the early citizens of Hardin County. In this county they held a "Derby" and there were several race courses within the county limits. The best track, known as Martin's Turf, was midway between Elizabethtown and the South Fork (birth-place) farm. Because of its proximity to the Lincoln farm it is probable that Thomas Lincoln visited the track on many occasions.

During the period of the Lincolns' residence in Elizabethtown several public exhibitions were given. Theatrical troupes as early as 1789 traveled throughout the state presenting performances. It is not unlikely that on many occasions the Lincolns were given ample opportunity to witness these presentations.

School exhibitions were annually featured. At the closing of a school term of the Elizabethtown academy it was the custom to exhibit the work of the pupils. One of these exhibitions was held on August 14, 1807, and while it was in progress subscriptions were solicited for another school term.

Animal circuses occasionally toured central Kentucky, and there is a possibility that on Saturday, June 24, 1809, Abraham Lincoln, although less than a year old, saw an elephant. It is likely that almost the entire population of the county came to Elizabethtown on that day to view the exhibition.

The homes in a community are a true index to cultural characteristics. Records show that during Thomas Lincoln's residence in Elizabethtown, hewed log houses were gradually replacing round log houses. These buildings had shingled roofs fastened with poplar pegs, plank floors, and windows with sash and glass. It is clearly evident that the cabin homes of Elizabethtown were comfortable and suitable to pioneer needs. As Thomas Lincoln was a carpenter, his cabin must have been superior to the others.

In addition to log cabins, brick buildings and residences were erected. "One building was fifty by twenty-five feet, two stories high, the brick walls resting on huge stone foundations with a deep cellar under the whole building. The wainscoting was of seasoned black walnut and the mantelpieces curiously wrought were also of black walnut. The plaster was more than one inch thick . . . and . . . so well trowelled that a man could almost see his face in it."

In this cultural environment Lincoln's parents made their first home, and here their first child was born. When the family moved to the South Fork (birthplace) farm it is hard to think that they would lower their standards of living. They likely enjoyed as many benefits on the farm as they did in the pioneer town, because after their move they did not sever their connections with Elizabethtown. It is probable that they visited the county seat on many occasions and that Abraham Lincoln became familiar with the town and its environs.

### *Religious Influences*

Lincoln's Kentucky environment was not without its religious influences. During his life in Kentucky the Methodist and Baptist churches created the background of the community's religious life.

There are traditions that many Methodist camp meetings were held in the Lincoln communities, directly influencing Lincoln's religious life. Several Lincoln biographers have given especial attention to these early religious activities. One of these camp meetings, according to tradition, was held in the Knob Creek community during Lincoln's residence there. These stories have been greatly exaggerated and should not be accepted as authentic. It is, however, an historic fact that Benjamin Ogden, the first pioneer Methodist minister in the western country, resided for a while in Elizabethtown and likely conducted numerous religious meetings throughout the county.

The Baptist influences are as far removed as those of the Methodist. Of the two churches the Baptist faith predominated and the Elizabethtown church, founded in 1781, was the first organization of that faith west of the Alleghany Mountains.

These two religious faiths have been discussed in order to show that religion flourished in this community in that early day. However, because of Lincoln's tender age he likely received little guidance or instruction in either faith.

It is interesting to note how many religious faiths influenced Abraham Lincoln during his life, though he never affiliated with any church. His forebears were Puritan, his ancestors came under a Quaker influence. Both his mother and step-mother were married by Methodist ministers. His mother was a Baptist, his father died a loyal member of the Disciples' Church, his first school teacher was a Catholic, his wife was

originally an Episcopalian, and while president, Lincoln himself attended the Presbyterian Church.

### *Educational Advantages*

The impression has been created that the community of Lincoln's birth presented no opportunities to obtain an education. Such impressions are unfounded and do not coincide with historic fact. Education in the county in which Lincoln was born was developed to a high degree. By referring to an ancient school trustees' book for the years 1799 to 1816 it has been discovered that a two-story schoolhouse was in use in Hardin County. This school house was 24 feet long and 34 feet wide. The floor was constructed with tongued and grooved poplar lumber. There were four twelve-pane windows and a stone chimney, and a fireplace was constructed on each floor. In order to erect such a pretentious school building a lottery was conducted to raise the necessary funds.

The instructions for the schoolmaster to maintain order are of unusual interest. The teacher was instructed to suppress card playing, gambling of all kinds (even though the building was erected by lottery), cussing, swearing, and bad language, talking, whispering and disorderly conduct. The scholars were also to be prohibited from climbing, shooting popguns, pin guns, bows and arrows, and the throwing of stones and the use of various dangerous and deadly weapons was not allowed.

In the year 1809, the year of Lincoln's birth, it was ordered that the subscribers to the school were to furnish in rotation, a wagon load of wood for each scholar. In the year 1812 Duff Green was employed as a teacher. While residing in Elizabethtown Green married Lucretia Edwards, a sister of Governor Ninian Edwards, of Illinois. A pupil of Green's later became governor of Kentucky. If Lincoln had been old enough to

attend the school taught by Duff Green, his formal education might have been more extensive; however, the strong sentiments of Green for the South may have influenced Lincoln during the formative period. Green later in life became prominent in national political affairs, becoming confidential adviser to the President during the administration of Andrew Jackson. He received a great deal of government patronage, became Congressional printer, was later elected to Congress, and visited London and interviewed the British cabinet on international policies.

In the year 1816, when the Lincolns left Kentucky, an extensive curriculum was selected by the board of trustees of the Elizabethtown school. The following courses were offered:

|                                 |   |         |
|---------------------------------|---|---------|
| English Language Grammatically  | } | \$15.00 |
| Geography and the use of Globes |   |         |
| Arithmetic                      |   |         |

Geometry, Plane and Spherical Trigonometry  
with their application to surveying

|                          |   |         |
|--------------------------|---|---------|
| Navigation and Astronomy | } | \$30.00 |
| Dialling and Gauging     |   |         |
| Algebra and Fluxions     |   |         |

Many such courses are not available in the more progressive schools today.

Young Abraham did not attend the Elizabethtown school, but studied under two schoolmasters at the Knob Creek school for short periods. Zachariah Riney was his first teacher, and if his educational training compared with his penmanship he was likely a master in the art of teaching. Original documents in his handwriting are today extant. Caleb Hazel, Abe's second teacher, resided near the Lincolns at their Knob Creek farm. This man was likely capable of conducting this pioneer school.

It is of course true that a good school existed not many miles distant. Many would say that Lincoln's family was not able to send him to a better school, but the fact that his father ranked fifteenth in the ownership of property in the county would be sufficient evidence that he would have eventually attended the Elizabethtown school located only twelve miles distant. If the Lincolns had remained in Kentucky, the formal education of Abraham Lincoln might have been more extensive than one year in school under five different schoolmasters.

During the period of the Lincoln family's residence in Hardin County there were living within the limits of the county, which means within a radius of about fifteen miles, many citizens who were destined to become prominent in the nation's history. For longer or shorter periods of time the county then had as residents the future fifteenth President of the United States, future governors of Illinois, Florida, Kentucky, and Arkansas, three future United States senators elected from Tennessee, Mississippi, and Kentucky, and three future congressmen from Kentucky, one of whom was elected speaker of the house.

Other noted characters living in Hardin County during this period were John James Audubon, the world's greatest ornithologist, Duff Green, later a member of President Andrew Jackson's "Kitchen Cabinet," and Worden Pope, the best lawyer in land litigation in Kentucky. There also lived in this county the father of Judge Advocate General Holt who conducted the Lincoln conspiracy trials, and the grandfather of the late Senator Robert M. LaFollette of Wisconsin.

The fact has just recently been discovered that James Buchanan resided in Hardin County for several months during the year 1813. He came to Kentucky with two Elizabethtown merchants who had been east to buy goods. His purpose in

coming was to represent his father's interests in numerous land litigations. Because of these interests he no doubt frequented the court house on many occasions. Very likely he knew Thomas Lincoln casually, as Lincoln was also involved in land litigations during the year 1813. There is even a possibility that James Buchanan may have seen his future successor in the presidency on Saturdays or county court days, but because of the difference in their ages it is unlikely that they would have paid each other more than casual notice.

During the year 1813, Daniel Johnson was jailer of Hardin County, and the duties of cleaning and caring for the jail building fell to the lot of his wife, Sarah Bush Johnson, who became the step-mother of Abraham Lincoln. James Buchanan very likely saw this woman on many occasions as she performed her daily tasks at the court house. Such a coincidence of two future succeeding Presidents of the United States residing within a short distance of each other in the same county many years before either of them achieved prominence is indeed unique.

The future governors mentioned were Ninian Edwards, governor of Illinois; William C. Duvall, governor of Florida; Charles A. Wickliffe, governor of Kentucky; John L. Helm, governor of Kentucky, and John Pope, governor of Arkansas. Students of Illinois history are, of course, familiar with the life of Ninian Edwards. The most picturesque of the governors mentioned was William C. Duvall. He achieved immortal fame as a character in a sketch entitled "Ralph Ringwood," which was a part of Washington Irving's "Crayon Papers."

Many of these Hardin County residents were personal friends of presidents of the United States and, as an early historian of the county stated; "Many were far superior in knowledge and statesmanship."

### *Conclusion*

It is to be hoped that Lincoln students will no longer accept the unfounded and incorrect Lincoln traditions, but that they will avail themselves of the many documentary Lincolniana that are today available. While it may be true that the great masses of the people prefer to have their Lincoln coming from barren waste lands, inhabited by dull and ignorant folk, yet such traditions should not be accepted by intelligent people. These traditions are so well grounded in the minds of many that centuries would be required to change this line of thought. However, Lincoln students should accept facts gleaned from reliable sources.

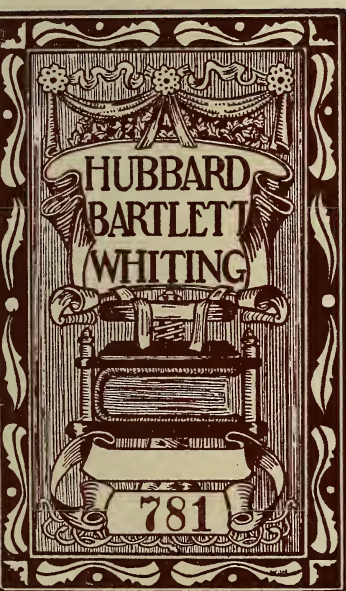
It is a matter of record that Abraham Lincoln during his childhood lived in a comfortable home, located in an attractive community, not removed from the outside world. His father was a man in good financial standing in the community. His cultural environment was exceptional. He received considerable home training from his parents. The community of his childhood was not without its religious influences. Excellent educational advantages were available, and other citizens of the community achieved corresponding success.

A new Lincoln biography will some day be written which will contain the true and documentary facts, with the elimination of tradition. When such a work is published the introductory chapters will contain "A New Portrait of Lincoln's Childhood Environment."

















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